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Gaming innovations look for casino slots

Not long ago, I was asked to serve on a panel evaluating the most innovative casino products of 2001 for the trade publication Casino Knowledge Reports.

As I waded through the mountains of material, manufacturers had sent in something that had been sitting in the slot machine industry. There are other areas of innovation, much of it having to do with accounting systems. A good deal more involves the transition to cashless gaming—you can expect replacement of coin hoppers with ticket printers just about as quickly as regulation allows.



Gaming
John Grochowski

There were such ball products, such as a ball designed to hold coin cups, in which players could walk with hands free. (Probably the wrong product for the wrong time, with cashless gaming on its way.) There were eye-tracking products, such as the system that would allow play on a slot machine. (Regulators already wary of ATMs on the casino floor would have little time in shooting down this one.)

But the innovations that will be most obvious to the public came from slot manufacturers. These are some of the slot products that got my healthy skepticism: the most innovative of 2001: Smart Touch, by Sigma Game. Not a game, but a system that can be used with many games to eliminate confusion. Players who are confused by the

sliding paylines, active pays and special features of video slots will love Smart Touch. Just touch any symbol or icon on the screen, and up pops an explanation. If you're confused about the change of payline No. 9, touch the icon for that payline and it'll be traced out, separate from the others. Or if you want to know the payouts on any symbol, touch that symbol and you'll get a graphic on the screen. This means slot machines

in a direction they need to go. Expect other manufacturers to follow. **▶ Paying Blazes**, by Atlantic Video slots perform best as low-limit games, especially as nickel games. Multiline high hit frequencies, but low payback percentages and low volatility—they're

even-keeled games, allowing extended play, but with smaller than usual chances of hitting big jackpots. **▶ Winning Riches**, with a 15-coin maximum bet, is designed for dollar players. At the top of its range of payouts, it returns 88 percent to players and has a 33 percent hit frequency that means fewer winning spins than on most video slots, but more than on most reel-spinners. It's a big step forward in trying to adapt video to high-limit play.

▶ ETO Hybrid slot platform, by Bally Gaming. This system, used for Bally's Popcorn slot and other games, adds a touch-screen box for reel-spinning games. That enables Bally to offer reel-spinning players the bonus rounds and play activity usually

associated with video slots. **▶ Ray Charles What'd I Pay** slots, by Bally Gaming. A couple of extra innovative touches are added onto the ETO platform in this game, which uses Ray Charles music and graphics of Ray and the Rayettes. What'd I Pay has Braille lettering, and also has an audio assist function so that vision-impaired players can listen to explanations as they play.

▶ Sticks and Stones, by Konami Gaming. Are you ready for reels that spin horizontally instead of top over bottom? That's what Konami has done with Sticks and Stones. Of course, if that was the only unique thing about the game, it would hardly be worth mentioning. But the format allows Konami to be creative

with its winning combinations. Among the winners are stickmen, with head on top, body in the middle and legs on the bottom in a vertical column. It's a fun little variation that wouldn't work with traditional forward-spinning reels.

▶ Big Top Circus, by Sigma Game. Sigma had a number of interesting entries, and one of the latest games, **▶ Circus**, has three themes—or five, since at 20-then are 99 potential winning combinations on a Big Top Circus screen. Players choose symbols to bet but instead of looking for traditional paylines, it takes a few options to get used to the difference, but then any player is an old pro. The concept can be adapted to any theme, and probably will create out a nice little

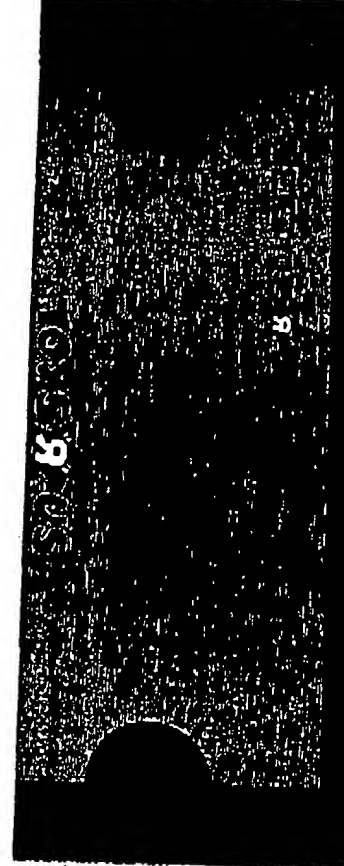
niche in the marketplace. **▶ Ripley's Believe It or Not**, by Bally Gaming. Unlike many of the products mentioned here, players in the Chicago area already have seen Ripley's. The bonus round in which players are asked trivia questions with multiple-choice answers in a first. Slot with game show themes, such as Jeopardy or Wheel of Fortune, don't involve an actual test of knowledge. Ripley's does—the bonus is bigger for correct answers, meaning the knowledgeable player, or one who uses the right answer, gets a little extra out of the game.

▶ Tex-Seven Poker, by Sigma Game. The most innovative video poker game entered deals the player 10 cards. The player then chooses to keep seven, which are

then reshuffled and dealt out five-card hands to determine winners. An interesting, fun new take on video poker.

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